

Pascal Garnier

La Théorie du panda (The Panda Theory)

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Foreign rights contact: Amélie Louat

amelie.louat@zulma.fr



TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH
BY WILL HOBSON

Biography: Born in 1949 in Paris, Pascal Garnier spent his teenage years globetrotting. His first two books, *L'Année sabbatique* and *Un chat comme moi*, were published in 1986. An exponent of short texts, but also the author of novels and children's books, Pascal Garnier is both a prolific and varied author who is unexcelled when it comes to depicting insipid characters leading dull existences. But his lucid pen never becomes over-sharp or mean. "A new presence in the landscape of the *roman noir*" (*L'Humanité*), Pascal Garnier now lives in Lyon, where he continues to paint and write.

Recent publications:

Lune captive dans un oeil mort, 2008

Comment va la douleur?, Zulma, 2006

Flux, Zulma, 2005

Parenthèse, Plon, 2004

Les Hauts du bas, Zulma, 2003

Summary

Thanks to his talents as a chef and his indolent charisma, Gabriel has barely appeared from parts unknown before he is on intimate terms with the inhabitants of a small town in Brittany—amongst others, an extremely beautiful hotel receptionist, two strung out junkies and, in particular, Jose, the owner of the Faro, whose wife is in hospital.

Like the stuffed panda that has ended up on the Faro bar, Gabriel offers himself and his time to the men and women who gravitate towards him, by turns surprised and seduced, but all equally trusting. And yet if only they knew...

Once again Pascal Garnier displays all his charm.

Extract

He is sitting on his own at the end of a bench. An empty railway platform with a tangle of metallic roofing merging into the gloom. The station of a small town in Brittany on a Sunday in October. It could be anywhere by the look of it but it is Brittany all the same—its inland, at least: the sea is a long way off, unimaginable; it's not a picturesque place. A faint smell of manure hangs in the air. A clock shows 17.18. Head bowed, elbows on knees, he is looking at the palms of his open hands. Your hands always get dirty on trains, he thinks. Not dirty exactly so much as greasy, especially under the nails, with that grey sweat that comes from all the people who've touched the handles, armrests and tables before you. He shuts his hands again, lifts his head. Since the complete inactivity on all sides seems to provoke him, he gets to his feet, grabs his overnight bag, walks fifteen or so yards up the platform and takes the underground passage to the station exit. He doesn't meet anyone on the way. With his teeth he tears open the plastic envelope covering the minuscule bar of soap and washes his hands for a long time. The sink has two taps, which means he has to go back and forth between the two of them because the water comes out boiling from the left and freezing from the right. He doesn't look at himself in the mirror, just catches a glimpse of his face because he can't help it, like an anonymous passer-by as you turn the corner of a street. The towel is hardly bigger than a handkerchief, made of honeycomb cloth, the kind you always get in cheap hotels. He does a circuit of the room wiping his hands. A table, a chair, a bed, and a cupboard containing a pillow, a Tartan blanket—predominant colour: almond green—and three coathangers. All made of the same imitation wood, MDF and veneered rosewood. He throws the towel down on the brown chenille bedspread. It's stifling. The radiator only offers two options: on or off. He had got rid of a litter of kittens once by shutting them in a shoebox lined with cotton soaked in ether. It hadn't taken long, the miaowing, the scratching of their claws. His bag at the foot of the bed, the handles flopped down at its side, the tongue of its zip hanging out, looks like an exhausted dog. He jerks back the curtain and throws the window open wide. Still that smell of manure. A street light sprays a wan glow over half a dozen lock-up garages with corrugated iron doors of the same indefinable colour. Above them hangs a sky:

there always has to be one of those. The bed is as soft as the ceiling is hard. The overhead light with a frosted glass dish clumsily suggesting some sort of flower in bloom fails to brighten up proceedings. He turns it off.

“Do you know where you can get something to eat round here?”

“Sunday evening?...Try the Faro, second on the left going down the street. But I don’t know if it’s open. Shall I give you the door code in case you get back after midnight?”

“No need, I’ll be back before.”

The receptionist is called Madeleine, if the pendant round her neck is to be believed. While not beautiful, she is not ugly either. She wavers between the two, shall we say. But she is indisputably a brunette. A hint of moustache highlights her upper lip.

A few dark shops on the street, like empty aquariums. A car passes in one direction, two in the other. No pedestrians.

The Faro is more of a bistrot than a restaurant. Apart from the owner sitting at the bar, a pen in his mouth, engrossed in a few obscure bookkeeping tasks, the place is deserted.

“Evening. Any chance of getting something to eat?”

“I’m not serving food this evening.”

“Ah...A Coke then...No, a beer.”

Off his stool, the man can barely be more than 5 ft 4. Stocky with a rough growth of beard, he is like a wild boar with doe-eyes, their gaze filtered by long lashes that curl up at the end. He pulls a glass of beer, sets it down on the counter after mechanically giving the spot a wipe.

“Usually I serve food but not this evening.”

“Too bad.”

The owner stands there awkwardly for a moment, his eyes lowered, shaking his cloth, and then abruptly returns to his stool behind the cash-till.

Apart from the four brass lamps drenching the bar, the rest of the establishment is sunk in shadow. Probably because there are no other customers. Tables and chairs can be made out, and further off, in the back room, children’s toys, a pedal tractor, building blocks, Lego, an open book, sheets of paper, scattered felt tips. He doesn’t touch his beer. Maybe he doesn’t really feel like it after all.

“Would you like to eat?”

“Yes.”

“My wife does the cooking. But she’s in hospital.”

“I’m sorry.”

For a moment all that can be heard is the fizzing of the froth on top of the beer.

“Do you like cod stew?”

“Yes... I think.”

“I’ve got some left over. I was going to shut. If you fancy...”

“That would be good.”

“Have a seat. No, not in the restaurant, come with me.”

The backroom suddenly erupts in a clamour of lemon yellow neon. Together they step over the pedal tractor, the building blocks, the Lego bricks, the sheets of paper spattered with brightly coloured children’s drawings.

“Go there.”

The table he sits at faces a monumental television. It is covered with an oilcloth with a pattern of white daisies against an apple green background.

“I won’t be a minute.”

Before leaving the room, the owner presses a button on the remote. The screen pumps out a stream of incoherent images and deafening noises like blood from a slit throat, a constant gurgling.

...BUT THE TOLL IS ONLY AN ESTIMATE. IN NORTHERN IRELAND...

“Bacalao!”

The owner sets two plates filled to overflowing with cod, potatoes, peppers and tomatoes on the table along with a bottle of vinho verde.

“Bon appétit.”

“Thank you.”

...THE PARENTS HAVE DELIVERED A MESSAGE TO THE KIDNAPPERS. WE GO OVER TO THEM NOW...

“It’s Marie, my wife, who makes it but I’m the one who taught her. I am Portuguese, she is Breton. She could only make crepes. She still does. We’re in Brittany so you have to make crepes for the Bretons. Are you Breton?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“Why?”

“Bretons down their beer in one, not like you.”

“Is it serious?”

“What? Not to be Breton?”

“No, your wife.”

“No. A cyst. She’s strong. It’s the first time she’s been ill. I drove her to hospital this morning. The children are at their grandmother’s. It’s better for them.”

...THE ACCIDENT FORTUNATELY CLAIMED NO VICTIMS. FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT IN CAIRO, LAURENT PÉCHU...

“How many do you have?”

“Two, a boy and a girl, Gaël and Maria, seven and five.”

...IT COULD BE HUMAN ERROR...

“How about you, do you have children?”

“No.”

“Are you a sailor?”

“No.”

“I said that because of the reefer jacket.”

“They’re practical things to wear.”

...AT HALF TIME, THE SCORE WAS 3-2...

The cod hasn’t been desalted enough. He doesn’t like the vinho verde, he would rather water but there isn’t any on the table.

He only has to ask....the owner isn’t going to refuse...it’s like the beer he hasn’t drunk... Stupid.

“Do you know Portugal?”

“I’ve been to Lisbon.”

“Beautiful city. Big! I’m from Faro. It’s pretty too but smaller. I came to France in 1977. St. Etienne, bricklayer. And then...”

...VICTORY AT OLYMPIA. HERE IS A FAN...

“Then I gave up the building trade to run the restaurant with Marie. Do you want a coffee?”

“No thanks.”

“Ah...”

...OVERCAST BUT CLEARING AND BRIGHTENING UP TOWARDS THE END OF THE DAY...

“It was very good. How much do I owe you?”

“Um...Ten euros. I won't charge for the beer.”

“Thanks.”

...WONDERFUL EVENING AND STAY WITH US ON ONE...

“I thought I'd be eating alone this evening and anyway... I'm called José. You?”

“Gabriel. See you tomorrow.”

“Yes, see you tomorrow...But I won't be serving while Marie's in hospital.”“Doesn't matter.”